San Diego Jewish Press

African-Americans and Jews
See Page 14

Heritage

A salute to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Voice of the San Diego Jewish Community Since 1914

Volume 5762. No. 18 Friday, January 18, 2002 5 Shevat, 5762 Access our archives at www.jewishsightseeing.com

African Americans and Jews: Alliance for hope

By U.S. Rep. Bob Filner

Perhaps no single person did more for the advancement of civil rights in the United States than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King's high-minded idealism and principled patience helped shine a light on a new path for all Americans, one devoid of discrimination and full of promise.

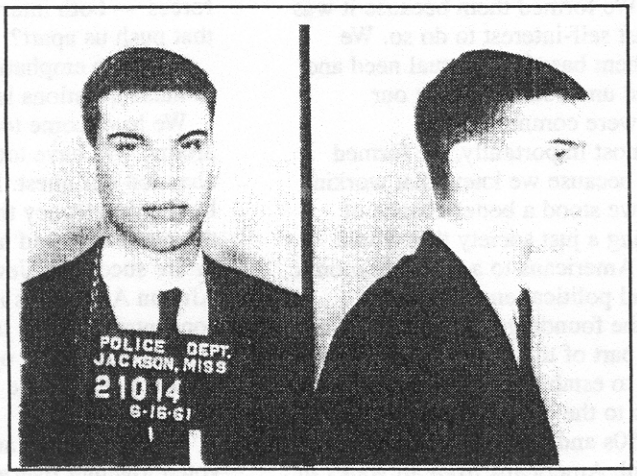
Dr. King, who would have been 73 years old on Jan. 15, was instrumental in delivering on the promise of true freedom, a freedom that had been denied since the beginnings of our nation. The work of Dr. King and many others in the 1950s and 1960s was but the culmination of multiple generations of work.

I would like to discuss one particular chapter in the African American struggle for freedom — a chapter that I had the privilege to participate in, and a chapter that I hope we can expand upon: the common struggle by African and Jewish Americans for common goals.

People may remember that, in the Sixties, whenever there was a gathering to discuss strategy for change, African and Jewish Americans were prominent participants — together.

In the summer of 1964, three Americans — one black Mississippian and two Jewish northerners — were killed in the struggle for equality and justice in the segregated South. They were run off the road as they drove at night, shot in their car by duly-sworn officers of the law, and buried in a Mississippi river bank.

Three Americans not yet old enough to vote — killed registering others to vote. Three Americans — practically separated at birth by the color of their skin, linked in a Mississippi summer by their ideals and convictions — joined forever at the bottom of a murky river in a haze of violence and bloodshed.



POLITICAL PRISONER — Here is California Congressman Bob Filner as he is booked into the Jackson, Miss., jail in June, 1961. Filner, then an 18-year-old sophomore at Cornell University, was arrested for "disturbing the peace" and "inciting a riot" while taking part in the now-famous Freedom Rides — groups of people who traveled to Alabama and Mississippi in an attempt to integrate restaurants, restrooms and bus station waiting rooms. Filner refused to post bail and spent two months in the Mississippi State Penitentiary to help keep national attention focused on the issue of integration. The Supreme Court overturned Filner's conviction — and eventually all the Jim Crow laws in the South.

I know that there are readers who will remember all their lives exactly where they were when they heard that Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney were dead. I know that there are readers, civil rights activists themselves, who heard the news and thought: there but for the grace of God go I.

In fact, there but for the grace of God do go I.

I was not in Mississippi that summer. But I had been there three years earlier as a Freedom Rider, and I had witnessed then firsthand the attempts to preserve segregation.

As our bus motored through the kingdom of American apartheid, I saw friends beaten and killed. I saw mobs attack women. I ducked from gunfire, I sat for several months in an isolation cell in the Mississippi State Penitentiary.

I was drawn South in 1961 as an American — and as a Jew.

Like many African Americans, I too was raised on stories of violent mobs and armed attacks, of vicious prejudice exploding into unspeakable acts of cruelty and horror. These stories were related to me in the relative safety of Pittsburgh and New York, but they conditioned me — and other Jewish Americans — to regard discrimination and violence by those in power as a threat to all groups and individuals without power.

It did not take long for my family to learn that the Cossacks and the nazis had spiritual heirs in the United States. Here, we soon learned, the armed forces of oppression wore sheets and burned crosses, and were no less vicious or cruel than the tormentors we had left

behind in Europe.

We also learned that there were those in power who hid behind country club walls rather than white sheets, and that their oppression of minority groups, while based on the subtle control of the marketplace rather than on the harsh handle of the whip, was no less devastating and total, and probably more so.

I relate this personal account to stress and to reinforce the perception of many in the American Jewish community. We in that community have formed alliances with African Americans for many reasons. We formed them because it was in our best self-interest to do so. We formed them based on mutual need and the shared understanding that our enemies were common.

And, most importantly, we formed alliances because we knew that working together we stood a better chance of establishing a just society that would allow all Americans to achieve economic justice and political empowerment.

From the founding of the NAACP in the early part of this century, through the struggles to establish labor unions in the 1930s, up to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Blacks and Jews served with Americans from all walks of life in the vanguard of national movements to achieve social justice and political empowerment.

This partnership has had its high points and low points, its successes and its failures. Together we have witnessed barriers fall and blood shed, and we have seen our mutual causes advanced.

But it seems that we have not always kept our eyes on the prize, and as many of us know all too well, we have sometimes let misperception and misunderstanding distract us.

Today, in 2002, we are forced to ask these questions: Do our shared goals carry greater weight than any differences? Are the bonds and values that tie us together stronger than the forces — both internal and external — that push us apart?

I believe emphatically that the answer to these questions is a resounding "yes!"

We have come too far together to turn around. We have too far to go to abandon our quest. Bound together both by the rich legacy that we share and by the possibility and necessity of our future successes, Jewish Americans and African Americans must together concentrate on our larger goals.

Only those who oppose the march of freedom and justice are served by our failure to unite.

Together, Black and Jewish hands voted together overwhelmingly in the last few presidential elections. And together our two communities can help to ensure the kind of change that our nation so desperately needs.

Let us — together — keep our eyes on the prize.